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Illinois GOP needs new program

By Jim Nowlan

Illinois Republicans “got their butts kicked in 2012,” observed one party stalwart who asked not to be named. And now the state GOP has created an “Illinois Growth and Opportunity Project” to reframe the party’s image. The group’s product had better be attractive to women, young people and Hispanic voters, or the party can kiss its chances in future statewide elections goodbye.

As illustration of just how bad things are, the GOP elected only 19 state senators in 2012 to the 59-member body.

When I was a boy, Downstate Republicans competed on even terms with Democrats, who were centered in Chicago. The state has been moving slowly to the Democrats ever since, and the state is now tagged as “deep blue” (heavily Democratic) by pundits. National Republicans don’t even bother campaigning here in presidential races.

The GOP slide began in the 1970s, as whites began to leave the state in greater numbers than they were coming into Illinois. That particular phenomenon continues; there are fewer whites in Illinois today than in 2000. Over recent decades, the number of Hispanics in Illinois has been growing rapidly.

A quick look at voter identification by groups shows that women prefer the Democratic Party significantly over the GOP, 37-24 percent, according to a 2012 Pew national poll. “Millennial voters,” as demographers call them, born after 1980, identified strongly with or leaned toward the Democrats, 55 percent to 36 percent for the GOP.

The big growth has been among those nationwide who say they are independent, which should give some hope to the GOP, especially in Illinois. The poll found 38 percent identifying Independent, 32 percent Democrat, and 24 percent GOP. In a 2008 poll I came across, 40 percent of Illinois voters identified as Independents.

And Republicans can still win in the state. Jim Thompson, Jim Edgar and George Ryan were elected governor as Republicans, though in an earlier time, and in 2010 Mark Kirk was elected U.S. Senator and Judy Baar Topinka, comptroller.

The problem is that Illinois GOP party leaders do not generally talk outside their own narrow group. Go to a GOP Lincoln Day event, and you see generally, maybe overwhelmingly, older white men and women.

But how does a political party “talk” to voters? Traditionally, this is done through candidates for office. And the prospective candidates for the GOP nomination for governor next year are young-to-middle age and somewhat moderate, e.g. state Senator Kirk Dillard, state Treasurer Dan Rutherford, U.S. Rep. Aaron Schock and Chicago mega-millionaire Bruce Rauner (little is known of Rauner’s political philosophy, although he is on many civic boards in the city).

The state Republican Party could adopt a policy program aimed at creating buzz with the media and ask that candidates endorse the positions.

Here are my recommendations. First, leave the divisive social issues to the churches.

Second, focus on education, especially higher education, which is of recent acquaintance to those under 30. One specific suggestion, maybe too specific, would be to propose that state money for higher education be directed to students through the underfunded state scholarship program for those who show need.

At present, most of the state's dollars go directly to colleges and universities. Instead, allocate the money to students, who could take their dollars to the colleges and universities that proved most attractive. This would give the students more power and would induce colleges and universities to become more efficient in order to attract the students and their money.

Third, create an under-30 advisory council to meet regularly with the state committee, to hear concerns of those who are not coming to the Lincoln Day feeds. This should not be a Young Republican group, but one more diverse. In other words, party leaders should get out of the comfort zone of GOP meetings.

A long-time friend of mine has been selected as chair of this Illinois Growth and Opportunity Project. Mike Bigger is the GOP state committeeman for a central Illinois congressional district. He is fair and open-minded. Mike is anxious to hear opinions from voters, and he can be reached by email at m.bigger@mchsi.com.

As savvy political observer Paul Green says: "Demography is destiny in politics and Illinois Republican leaders must attract more young people, minorities and disaffected suburban GOP voters" if the party is to win statewide elections.